



Discerning Lies Disguised as Truth

"You Shall Know the Truth, and the Truth Shall Set You Free"

CIA motto, etched in marble at the CIA headquarters in Langley, Va.

A recent stay in Philadelphia gave me opportunity to ponder the relationship between truth and freedom, important ideas in the grand American experiment. My hotel was situated just blocks from where Thomas Jefferson penned the "inalienable rights" of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness into the Declaration of Independence. When this sacred parchment was signed by members of the Continental Congress in the Pennsylvania State House in 1776, it captured the imagination of a young republic and gave Philadelphia its enduring, mythical status among the nation's historical cities.

Two hundred and thirty years later, the "birthplace of freedom" holds distinction as the nation's leader in homicides among cities with more than a million residents. The week I was there, the number of murders in town was just approaching 300, on pace to exceed the previous record-high year of 377. Officials noted with alarm that the rising trend was not so much drug or gang related as it was simply domestic: a violent spouse, an angry neighbor, a vengeful relative.

Not unique to Philly, such violence exists wherever economic desperation prevails. But it is a desperation exacerbated by the dehumanizing greed and materialism inherent in a "freedom" essentially synonymous with "free enter-

prise" in this country. It is a system where 1 percent of the population controls 40 percent of the nation's wealth and over 37 million Americans remain trapped in poverty. In the name of such freedom, our administration ("We come as liberators") orchestrated the invasion of Iraq, a country now facing a civilian death toll exceeding half a million men, women, and children. Can this be true freedom?

Jesus says that we can distinguish true and false prophets by their fruit (Matt. 7:17). This was evident at a quiet funeral 280 miles west of Philadelphia, following the brutal killing of five Amish schoolgirls in the Pennsylvania countryside. In a powerful demonstration of Christian love and forgiveness, a large contingent of the Amish community joined the family at the burial of the disturbed young man who committed the classroom murder-suicide, offering both sympathy and economic assistance. Unencumbered by the false gods of wealth, possessions, and self-serving individualism, our Amish brothers and sisters bore witness to truth that indeed sets people free. That we as the American church might likewise pay attention, repudiate lies, and insist on what is true, I offer this prayer:

"Father in heaven, we want to hear the words of your servant Paul in his Colossian letter, who warns of those who would take us captive through vain philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to your son, Jesus.

"We confess our vulnerability to the seduction of grand ideas, Philadelphian promises of liberty that have secured, at best, a tenuous sense of peace and security for those with the power to insulate themselves from the ravages of an unjust and failing order. Although with our lips we recite the beatitudes, we inwardly cling to a material dream that fails to satisfy yet

seems more palpable than Christ's radical bidding to embrace our poverty of spirit.

"Help us, therefore, to discern the truth from lies disguised as truth. Open our eyes to the destructive claims of those who leverage the holy language of 'freedom and justice' to justify unholy means in the service of unholy purposes. Give us boldness to reject a liberty that exists only to facilitate the nationalist pursuit of self-serving happiness, a hollow freedom that is achieved on the backs of those without options, an elusive and temporal freedom dependent upon the unsustainable deployment of violent force.

"Lord, you call us to give to you what belongs to you, and to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, yet we are tempted daily to yield to Caesar that which exceeds the bounds of his authority, while turning a blind eye to the human cost of preserving our access to the spoils of imperial power. In so doing, we fail to speak truth to those who would insist that our well-being is found in tools of coercion and control, smart bombs, torture, and wire fences.

"Forgive us, Lord, we pray. Find your Church faithful in believing the hope of the gospel... that your Kingdom is indeed at hand. Then might we truly embody good news to the poor, healing for the broken-hearted, liberty to the captives, to the honor and glory of your holy name. Amen." ■

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